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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 000343

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [CH](#) [IN](#) [FR](#)  
SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, JAN 21-28

REF: A. 07 NEW DELHI 5119  
[1](#)B. 07 KOLKATA 359  
[1](#)C. 07 KOLKATA 356

[1](#)1. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for January 21-28, 2008 that did not feature in our other reporting, including:

- New HP Government Gets Moving
- Prime Minister Singh to Visit Indo-Chinese Border Areas
- French President's Visit Raises Turban Issue for Sikhs
- Controversial Writer Taslima Nasreen Back in the Headlines
- UNICEF Reports Four Indian Children Die Every Minute
- First school for HIV Positive kids

New HP Government Gets Moving  
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[1](#)2. (U) In Delhi for a meeting of BJP-led NDA coalition consultations, recently-elected Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal announced a 50 percent reservation for women in local government panchayat institutions as well as urban representative bodies. Dhumal told the press, "It is our first effort to empower women and increase their representation in the share of power. We have taken the lead to bring them into the mainstream to make them part of the decision-making process and in matters of governance and development in rural and urban areas of the state." Dhumal also vowed to take on corruption and reduce unemployment with a focus on building critically needed infrastructure and road networks.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Comment: The 50 percent reservation for women represents a welcome BJP commitment to opening the political sphere to women. It may take time for women in the panchayats to assert themselves, but the Indian experience is that once they become more comfortable in their leadership roles, they are often more effective than their male colleagues. Dhumal's pledges on corruption, unemployment and infrastructure sound hopeful, but heavy state debts, a sulky

Congress government at the center and the usual Indian inertia and corruption will make these tasks difficult. End Comment.

#### Prime Minister Singh to Visit Indo-Chinese Border Areas

14. (SBU) Media sources report that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will visit Arunachal Pradesh on January 30-31 but will likely skip a visit to Tawang District; perhaps the most contentious area in India's border dispute with China. Instead, the media reports that he will visit the Indian Army's Mountain Brigade Headquarters at Lohitpur (the tri-border area with China and Burma) and focus on infrastructure projects along the border. Arunachal MP (and BJP member) Tapir Gao and Chief Minister Dorjee Khandu told the press that he would press the PM to clarify the GOI's stance related to China's claims to the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh.

15. (SBU) Coming on the heels of his visit to Beijing, when touchy issues were placed on the backburner economic complementarities and a shared vision of the "Asian 21st Century" were highlighted, the Prime Minister may seize the opportunity to take a shot across the bow of the Chinese regarding their claims to Arunachal Pradesh. In addition, after Indian Defense Minister Antony's December statement that the infrastructure gap along the India-China border was "alarming," PM Singh will likely use the visit to provide a new impetus to border infrastructure projects including the "Border Villages Illumination Program."

#### French President's Visit Raises Turban Issue for Sikhs

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16. (U) Various Sikh organizations in India appealed to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to address the ban on Sikh turbans in French government-run schools during the visiting French President Nicolas Sarkozy. In 2004, the French government passed a law banning students from wearing turbans in schools. The French government also refused to issue passports, driving licences and residence cards to Sikhs who refused to remove their turban for ID photos. With a population of around 6,000 Sikhs in France demanded a revision to French law in order to protect the identity of the Sikhs.

17. (U) The Sarkozy visit has stoked a turban revolution in Delhi and Punjab. In Delhi, at one of the most visited Sikh temples, Bangla Sahib, large posters with slogans saying "Sikhs have a right to wear turbans in France," have been hung. In Punjab, schools are training Sikh youths to tie their turbans and competitions are held rewarding students who can perfect the art of turban tying. The hit Punjabi songs include odes to turban wearing. Paramjit Sarna, President of the Delhi Gurudwara Sikh Committee asserted that the Prime Minister, who himself wears a turban, cannot turn a blind eye to the injustice being suffered by Sikhs in France.

18. (U) Comment: The revival of the issue of the Sikh turban ban on the eve of the French President's visit clearly demonstrates the sensitivity of the issue amongst the Sikh population. Both the Indian Sikh community and the Sikh Diaspora in France will likely continue mounting a campaign to articulate their outrage and assertion that the French rules are a form of racial profiling. Awareness campaigns led by the Sikh community have already had an impact. In October 2007, a revised US federal guideline gave airport screeners the option to pat down headwear at the metal detector if a passenger does not want to remove his turban for personal reasons.

#### Controversial Writer Taslima Nasreen Back in the Headlines

¶9. (U) On January 9, controversial writer Taslima Nasreen was awarded the French Prix Simone de Beauvoir for feminist writing. Currently, the exiled Bangladeshi writer remains at an undisclosed location in Delhi after she was forced to flee her home in Kolkata last November due to protests by Muslim groups who consider her writing anti-Islamic (reftels). French President Nicolas Sarkozy had hoped to present the award to Nasreen during his January 25-26 official visit, but fearing unrest, GOI on January 23 refused to allow a formal ceremony citing "security reasons." The French government then invited Nasreen to travel to Paris to receive the award, but the writer declined and asked that the award be sent to her.

¶10. (U) On January 24, the Indian government did, however, grant Nasreen a six month extension on her visa. The six month extension allows the GOI to periodically review Nasreen's status. Muslim groups protested the decision but have not taken to the streets.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: The Muslim vote bank remains important to Congress' electoral strategy, and after electoral defeats in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh a public celebration of the lightning rod Nasreen was the last thing Congress wanted. The six month visa extension basically allows the UPA to split the baby, not feting Nasreen while not kicking her out of the country (although they probably would have preferred Nasreen accept the award in France and not return). This episode proves again that Congress is "secular" but only up to a point. End Comment.

UNICEF Reports Four Indian Children Die Every Minute

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¶12. (U) The UN reported that India loses 5,753 children below the age of five every day - that's four a minute. Stepping back, the largest absolute number of newborn deaths occurs in South Asia, and India contributes a quarter of the world total. The UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report 2008 said about 20 per cent of these children die within an hour of birth and another 30 per cent within 28 days. Pneumonia kills most children in India - about 2 million followed by diarrhea. Of those who survive, about 46 per cent are malnourished. While the report is sobering, it is hardly surprising. Earlier this year, the UN's Human Development Report said that nearly 47.7% of Indian children are malnourished and 2.5 million annually die of starvation. Forty million kids will never go to school, and another 30 million must work to survive. Meanwhile, 380 million Indians subsist on less than a dollar a day, over 100 million are jobless, 24.71 million homeless, and 300 million still live in darkness. Two million Indians die each year from sanitation-related diseases like diarrhea, and nearly two-thirds have no access to clean drinking water or toilets.

¶13. (U) Comment: While several aspects of India may shine, the progress report is not exactly picture perfect. India's record is worse than its less developed neighbors Bangladesh and Nepal. The UN reports are extraordinarily useful in reminding Indians (and the world) that not every Indian citizen is benefiting from their country's annual growth rate of 9.2 percent. While India has a food surplus, it also has more starving people than sub-Saharan Africa. While medical tourism is the latest rage, many Indians are desperately in need of primary health centers. While the politicians are scrambling to project the image of social responsibility, it is the media that has been a more effective instrument of change. Journalists argue that the answer is not population, nor policy, nor economics. The heart of India's inequitable human development may be the belief that citizens are, in fact, unequal. It is this attitude that will continue to set India apart from the Development World, no matter how many Bentleys the elite buy.

## First School for HIV Positive Kids

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¶14. (U) In Nagpur, the largest city in central India and the second capital of the state of Maharashtra, the Municipal Corporation (NCM) has set up schools exclusively for HIV positive children that have similar facilities to other civic schools. To date, the school is now providing classes to 147 children who had to be forced to stop studies in regular schools after they were shunned and ostracized by society. The children have been given free text books and mid-day meals. NMC officials are also trying to root out the stigma against HIV infected children by also admitting 28 children who either have no parents or have just one parent. The Nagpur school demonstrates the first attempt by a civic body to shoulder the responsibility of educating children living with HIV.

¶15. (U) HIV / AIDS is one of the greatest threats to India's desire to become a more productive and prosperous nation. There are more than five million Indians infected, and new infections are occurring every day. On paper, discriminating against people with HIV / AIDS in India is prohibited. However, discrimination is visible in society and HIV positive people are struggling to lead lives of dignity. Unfortunately, the crisis continues to deepen, as it becomes clearer that the epidemic is affecting all sectors of Indian society, not just the groups - such as sex workers and truck drivers - with which it was originally associated.

¶16. (U) Comment: Isolating the children from mainstream schools is still discriminatory. But local NGOs report that children are being turned away from mainstream school and, even if they are not, parents are unwilling to send them as

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they fear stigma and discrimination. We will continue to monitor the success of this "separate but equal" attempt to provide education to an otherwise disenfranchised population.  
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